



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Second Sunday of Lent

March 8, 2020

“And Abraham was Seventy-Five Years Old”

(Genesis 12:2,4)

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. .
. Abraham was seventy-five years old . . .” (Gen.12:2,4).*

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

I have a hypothesis I've been testing for the past few years. It goes like this: as you are in life, that's how you will be in your elderly years . . . only more so. If you lean towards wordy and verbose in life, be careful, because there's a good chance you'll turn into a windbag in your elderly years. If you are grateful in life, your gratitude will increase in old age because you'll find the blessings of life to be cumulative. If given to anger and grumpiness and discontent in life, watch out, for you will find even more reasons to be angry, grumpy and discontent in your elderly years. If loving and kind in life, you're going to make the best grandparent, because you'll be even more loving and kind in your elderly years. If mostly self-centered in life, you will be the same self-centered miserable person in old age, only more so. If generous, then more generous. If stingy, then even more so. If strong willed, then absolutely inflexible. As you are in life, that's how you will be in your elderly years . . . only more so.

I'm wondering what worries you about that hypothesis. The good news is we can change. By grace, you can become a new person. More than just turning over a new leaf, you can, in Christ, live a new life.

I wonder what Abraham was like as a young man. I sure hope he was full of vim and vigor and had a deep trust in God, because he was going to need all of that and more in his elderly years. Imagine, God waited until Abraham was seventy-five years old before coming to him and saying, "Go! Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house . . . leave it all behind and go to the land that I will show you."

Can you picture Abraham out there in the wilderness of Haran with his thin legs and arthritic knees and bruised forearms? My guess is he's missing a tooth or two, and others are giving him trouble. At night, there are frequent interruptions to his sleep, and during the day he's convinced everyone mumbles. He coughs a lot

and has reason to; it's a "productive cough" as they say. And his hands tremble a bit, and Sarah has finally convinced him to stay off ladders. And his memory? His constant search for words and names frustrates him to no end.

Imagine, God could have chosen any man in the world to make him the father of a great nation, but he didn't choose one so young, strong, brave and handsome. He chose an old, anxious man. Why? Paul says "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." In other words, let there be no hero worship. "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:28ff).

But there may be other reasons for choosing an elderly person. Maybe God is trying to teach us something about *our* elderly years. Maybe there's a lesson in this ancient text that would be so good and healthy for *us* to remember in 2020.

In the Bible, aging is a time of promise and continued blessing, a time of wisdom and completion and discernment. The old are respected, honored, venerated. Job writes, "Is not wisdom found among the aged? Does not long life bring understanding?" (12:12). Therefore, Leviticus 19 says, "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD" (v. 32). The elderly don't have to earn our respect. They already have. The principle here is that the new generation owes a measure of thanks to every member of the previous generation. Our elders planted the fields and fought the wars and advanced the arts and sciences. They've done sweat of the brow work and made sacrifices. So, by their efforts, however humble, they have earned a measure of gratitude and respect.

How very different from our culture which is in the habit not of thanking previous generations, but of blaming them. How very different from our culture which puts a high premium on youth and tends to push the elderly aside. We so admire the young executive, the young quarterback, the young IT techno whiz, we so admire the young that it is a rare elderly person who is not haunted by a feeling he is somehow being tossed aside and forsaken. The elderly can feel forsaken by his family, by society, even by the church of which he has been a faithful member all

his life. As we gradually lose physical strength and vigor and mental faculties, we can also lose our instrumental role in life. We can feel no longer needed as we were before. Therefore, we can lose prestige and dignity. Some of you can identify with the anguished cry of the Psalmist: “Cast me not away when I am old; when my strength wanes, forsake me not.” In contrast, Abraham was 75 when the Lord called him.

Today, it’s pretty much expected that aged parents do not live with their adult children. If they can no longer care for their own homes or themselves, they have to live in some sort of institution. A mother can take care of five or six young children, but in our culture five or six adult children cannot seem to find a way to take care of their elderly mother. It makes me think of the words of Jesus: Whatever we do for the least of these, you do to me (Mt. 25:40).

Maybe it’s time we think in new ways about aging. Better said, maybe it’s time we recover God’s ancient ways. Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to be the father of a great nation.

God wants to use everyone as his instruments, also the elderly as his hands and feet and voice in the world. He wants to use those strengths and talents and experiences and gifts. “Let nothing be wasted.” To put it in the bluntest of terms, if you’re not dead, you’re not done. Therefore, retiring from work does not mean retiring from life. In fact, the elderly who remain active and invested in the affairs of their church, their community, their nation and world . . . in short, people who still care about and give of their time and energy to outside concerns, they not only add years to their lives but add a lot of life to their years. Experts say if we want to be happy and healthy in our retirement, we should think of it as a career change rather than the end of our careers. It doesn’t have to be full-time, or even paid. But stay active. Keep serving. Do what you’re good at and what you enjoy doing in service of others and to his glory.

Of course, there are limitations. *Get Healthy Watertown* recently took a small poll of seniors living in Watertown, and 84% of those polled reported day to day meal preparation was difficult. 58% could use help with simple tasks, such as changing a light bulb and shopping for groceries. Nearly 50% struggle keeping the house clean. So yes, there are limitations.

But there are also blessings of time and wisdom and discernment. The elderly know some things that young adults are only in the process of learning. Among them are these:

That aging is and can be a process of growing, and so life, from the perspective of years can be even more precious and beautiful and intense and therefore creative and productive.

That with an accumulation of decades come some gifts reserved only for the elderly: grandchildren, for instance, but also a certain discernment and freedom.

That when you are young you live life, but when you get older, you start savoring life; it's one of the surprises of aging, you appreciate life more.

That life is cumulative. As the years pile one on top of another, gratitude to God piles up as well because there's a greater awareness of how richly God has blessed us along the way. The most grateful people I know of tend to be the elderly. The converse also seems to be true. Sometimes one must wait until evening before he is truly aware of how splendid the day has been.

And, mysteriously, with age comes a deepening trust in God, a trust in his will, a trust in his care, and most importantly, a confidence that nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. We need that like never before. We need the faith and trust and time and skills of the elderly.

I'm thinking of some of the saints I've known over the years here who were still so full of life and care for others. The week before Shirley Draeger died, from her hospital bed she told our Parish Nurse, "Bonnie, the staff here cannot talk to patients about religion, but *I* can talk to them. *I* can share God's Word . . . **and I do!**"

Remember Pastor Seegers? More than once he said to me, "The older one gets, the better one understands and appreciates the grace of God in Jesus Christ."

I've found that to be true. As I grow in years, I'm thinking of God more and more, not as a distant acquaintance, but as a friend, a lifetime companion. Maybe you do too. Someone very close and steadfast. One who knows me, really knows me,

and still finds a way to love and forgive me. A friend who will not leave me or push me away. A friend who is so generous with gifts of satisfying food and comfortable clothing and cozy shelter and all those 1st Article gifts, but also gives me (and you) his promises of Holy Baptism, his body and blood, his forgiveness, and the faith to receive it and the assurance of eternal life. Psalm 46, “Even to your old age and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and I will save” (v. 4).

In Christ he has kept those promises and keeps them still. Jesus has carried us, each of us. He has washed us by his blood, forgiven us, and saved us. He has called us to service in his kingdom, each of us, young and old. Let nothing be wasted. That call of his, given us already at Holy Baptism, gives meaning and purpose and direction to our days, all of them. He gives us something to do when we wake up in the morning, regardless of our age. He has planned a whole life for us and will use the whole life. He will forgive the whole life and has unique blessings in store for every stage of our lives. Of course, the greatest of these gifts will come at the very end, when we close our eyes one last time, and our Friend Jesus opens them again on the other side and welcomes us home.

Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to get up and go. Thanks be to God! Amen.

